

The World of Chinese

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A middle-aged Chinese man with no English language skills walks into a hospital and notices a sign reading “CT室” above a door. The acronym will likely leave him mystified, and it is highly unlikely that he’d think to look in a Chinese dictionary for the answer to his problem.

Yet times changes, and should he happen to be packing The Commercial Press’s newly revised Modern Chinese Dictionary (sixth edition), he would find the everything he needs jotted down in a handy list at the back of the book.

However, the inclusion of some 239 words and expression that begin with English letters has caused something of a stir in media and academic circles. More than 100 scholars have signed a letter of complaint that decries the decision to include non-Chinese words in the dictionary, going as far as to accuse the publishers of breaking laws and regulations regarding the use of Chinese language and “destructing the very foundation of Chinese culture.”

Harsh words indeed, and ones that found their way to the mailboxes of both the General Administration of Press and Publications of China, and the State Language and Letters Committee on August 28.

So far these two august institutions have yet to issue a response, leaving the floor open for heated debate and allowing two distinctive groups of opinion leaders time to marshal their arguments in a bid to win public support.

If you are learning Chinese, you are likely already familiar “the Modern Chinese Dictionary” or 《现代汉语词典》 (Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn), a beacon of clarity in the darkly chaotic and confusing world of Chinese language. First published in 1978, the dictionary is the leading reference work as regards the use of modern Chinese characters in words and expressions, and has so far been revised six times by its compilers, the Language Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

More than 13,000 single characters and 69,000 words and expressions were included in the latest edition, as well as the offending section, entitled “Words and Expressions that Begin with Western Letters.”

The section lists common English acronyms such as CPI (Consumer Price Index, 消费物价指数 *xiāofèi wùjià zhǐshù*), FTA (Free Trade Agreement, 自由贸易协议 *Zìyóu Màoyì Xiéyì*) and PM2.5 (particles that are air pollutants with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less, small enough to be inhaled, 可入肺颗粒物 *kě rù fèi kēlìwù*), and follows them with Chinese explanations. There are also descriptions of items that comprise both English and Chinese, such as POS机 (Point of Sale Machine) and U盘 (flash drive).

In the real world, it is fairly obvious that English, itself an eager adopter of loan words from other languages, has already secured quite a firm toehold in everyday Chinese. For instance, almost all Chinese media use the acronym “NBA,” as do the tens of millions of Chinese fans who watch basketball. The Chinese term for the National Basketball Association is “美国职业篮球联赛 *Měiguó Zhíyè Lánqiú Liánsài*” or “美职篮 *Měizhílán*” for short, which for perhaps obvious reasons is used with markedly less frequency. A quick search on Baidu (the largest Chinese search engine) supports this, generating 782,000 results for the Chinese term and 100,000,000 for the original English one.

The Modern Chinese Dictionary is bidding to be the go-to resource for people who need guidance to decode these instances of linguistic overlap, and The Commercial Press recently hosted a conference to debate the rights and wrongs of its position. The ensuing discussion has strong echoes of the back and forth spurred by L'Académie Française over the encroachment of English words into French.

Those in favor of the dictionary's position include Hou Min, a professor at the Communication University of China. "The Modern Chinese Dictionary is not made out of a vacuum, but with respect to the reality of language use," she said at the conference. "I think it's necessary to collect and list these acronyms that are already in active use among our people."

Zheng Zhengguo, a senior journalist at the People's Daily newspaper, takes the opposing view, one befitting of his role as a lead writer of the original letter of complaint. In an interview with his own newspaper, Zheng said the increasing speed with which Englishisms are penetrating the Chinese language is a cause for alarm.

"If we don't take measures, our next generation will prefer English over Chinese," he said, citing a UNESCO survey that indicates 46 percent of world's languages are dying or are already dead. Zheng said that the increasingly "invasion" of English words should serve as a warning, and that if it continues, it may only be a few hundred years before English has entirely usurped Chinese.

This (slightly alarmist) position was challenged by the president of the Chinese Dictionary Association, Jiang Lansheng, who voiced her strong confidence in the future of Chinese and Chinese culture. "If we see 239 English acronyms as a threat to Chinese language and culture, then our language and culture are too vulnerable... If our people choose to use English words, that's because they are valuable additions to Chinese in terms of communication," she said in a subsequent interview.

What's your stance on this ongoing debate – should Chinese dictionaries be strictly reserved for Chinese, or should foreign words and acronyms in common usage be included? What (if anything) does it mean for China's stance on the adoption or rejection of foreign culture as a whole, and which are your favorite English acronyms already doing the rounds in Chinese texts? Let us know!

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